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The Rite (2011)

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The Rite (2011)

Abstract

This is a film review of *The Rite* (2011).

The Rite joins a growing canon of films exploring the phenomenon of religious exorcism, especially within the Catholic tradition. There has been a modern revival in the practice since the pontificate of John Paul II, who mandated in 2004 that a trained exorcist be appointed in every diocese. For the faithful, the film serves nicely as a soft apologetic, first of all, for the distinction between mere mental illness and a distinctly ‘spiritual’ affliction, and second, for the putative reality of personified evil, the Devil. The film is loosely based on the book, *The Rite: The Making of a Modern Exorcist* by Matt Baglio, which records the experiences of Father Gary Thomas, who was sent to Rome by his Bishop for training in the theology and rite of demonic exorcism.

In the film, Father Michael Kovak (Colin O’Donoghue) arrives in Rome as something of a skeptic. Having earlier tried to leave the priesthood because of his doubts, he is unceremoniously reminded that leaving could mean having to repay the expenses of his costly education. He is urged instead to give things one more try by going to Rome for training as an exorcist. Having grown up in a funeral home, Father Kovak is deemed to have the ideal temperament for dealing with the hard realities of human anguish. During a Vatican sponsored class on exorcism, Kovak quickly challenges the instructor, Father Xavier (Ciarán Hinds), with the obvious possibility that these ‘possessed’ victims are merely mentally ill,

requiring psychiatric intervention. Consequently, Kovak is sent to meet Father Lucas (Anthony Hopkins). During the visit, he witnesses the exorcism of a pregnant teen, an incest victim who hears voices, knows impossible facts, speaks in tongues, and coughs up 3 nails during the prayers.

At this point, two bewildering but vital anthropological details about the Catholic rite of exorcism come to light that furnish important plot points in the film. First, and in contrast to popular belief, the prevailing understanding of exorcism in the Catholic church today holds that exorcism is not a ‘one shot’ affair. No single exorcism session cures the affliction, and some exorcisms go on for years, or even decades. ‘The rite’ is more of a process than a single, dramatic intervention. Second, it is widely understood in Catholic circles that exorcists must always prayerfully and sacramentally guard against demonic affliction themselves, as Baglio’s book also makes clear. The idea of ‘possessed’ priests, even exorcists themselves, may seem incredible. Even so, the film seeks to explore and rectify these two misconceptions, and also to exploit them for dramatic effect.

It turns out that the pregnant girl’s condition worsens to the point of requiring hospitalization. Drugs and other medical therapies prove ineffective in calming her, so another exorcism is performed. That night, the child miscarries and the girl dies from the trauma. Father Lucas is grief stricken over the failure,

falling into despair and doubt. Father Kovak's confidence in 'the rite' is further shaken when he begins to suspect that Father Lucas is a charlatan, especially when it is discovered that a frog which 'manifested' during an exorcism prayer may have been intentionally hidden in the old man's bag of relics. Teetering between belief and doubt, haunted by strange nightmares, and shocked by the inexplicable death of his dad, Father Kovak and a journalist confidant, Angelina (Alice Braga), decide to seek out Father Lucas. When they arrive, Father Lucas shows all signs of being possessed, and Father Kovak is faced with a choice. He can wait days for help, or perform the rite himself. Seeing little choice, he overcomes his doubts and prays the rite of exorcism over Father Lucas.

Hopkins proves to be as creepy as ever during the final exorcism scenes. Whereas earlier, Father Lucas seemed overworked with vacant eyes exhausted by constant tragedy, the possessed priest's eyes dance with perfect malice. His voice drips with vicious threats. The casting here is perfect, and the special effects are solid enough, even if we have seen them before. Unfortunately, Hopkins' performance sheds too little light in a largely flawed film. If part of the rationale for a film like this is to generate interest in the question of 'the supernatural,' the special effects and dramatization of facts are hardly expected to be convincing. If, however, the point is merely to strike terror into the audience, other films in the genre are more effective. The ratio of facts and dramatic

filmmaking are too compromised all around, leaving a film that seems premised upon half-measures in every direction, only half factual or scary.

Father Kovak succeeds in exorcising Father Lucas, after learning the name of the possessing demon. Consequently, he overcomes his doubts and opts to remain in the priesthood. But, will an audience be similarly convinced to give up its doubts, in a skeptical age? I suspect many will not. As an ‘apologetic’ for Catholic practice, the film is certain to be of interest as a suggestion of ‘proof’ for preternatural beliefs. Alternatively, the private and largely anecdotal nature of the exorcism rite, along with its apparent ineffectiveness in some cases, will provide ample ammunition for skeptics with a more psychoanalytic disposition. The film does serve as a loose record of current Catholic beliefs about possession and exorcism, and so it has a kind of anthropological allure. Also, for fans of the genre, *The Rite* is sometimes scary, if predictable. As the Church battles evils within and without, the question of ‘proof’ looms large as a salient issue in this film that fails to deliver much by way of it. With so much ambiguity, I suspect people will see what they want to see, but if Father Lucas is right, that’s just how the devil likes it.